11/20/66

A FEW WEEKS AGO I SUGGESTED THAT WE PREPARE OURSELVES FOR ADVENT BY CONSIDERING THE MEANING OF THE MAN JESUS CHRIST, WHAT HE DID AND SAID- IN AN ATTEMPT TO LOOK AT AND GRASP THE GLORY OF THE WHOLE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL. NEXT SUNDAY IS THE BEGINNING OF THE ADVENT SEASON, THE WEEKS OF EXPENTANCY LEADING UP TO THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD--AT WHICH TIME WE WILL THINK ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT HAPPENED IN BETHLEHEM. AT THIS TIME, THEREFORE, I THINK IT APPROPRIATE TO DISCUSS THE MOST VIGOROUSLY CHRISTIAN WRITER THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN AND HIS MESSAGE TO US, IN HIS LETTERS TO THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES PAUL DISCUSSES PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT ARE AS OLD AS MAN HIMSELF, PROBLEMS THAT WE FIND HINDERING US EVEN TODAY--AND HIS ANSWERS ARE CLEAR CUT AND SHARP. THEY ARE ANSWERS FROM PERHAPS THE MOST THOROUGHLY CHRISTIAN THINKERS IN HISTORY.

IN THE OPENING SECTION OF HIS FIRST LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH PAUL MAKES THE STATEMENT THAT CHRIST CRUCIFIED IS A STUMBLING BLOCK TO THE JEWS AND FOLLY TO GENTILES. THIS STATEMENT REFERS TO THE TWO DOMINANT PHILOSOPHIES OF THE TIME--BY PHILOSOPHY I DO NOT MEAN THE STUFFY SPECULATIONS OF ACADEMIC PROFESSORS, BUT THE TOTAL MANNER IN WHICH PEOPLE THOUGHT, THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THEIR ENTIRE LIFE.

THERE WERE TWO CURRENT PHILOSOPHIES IN THE TIME OF PAUL--HEBRAIC AND

GREEK AND IT IS TO THESE HE REFERS WHEN HE SAYS STUMBLING BLOCK TO ~~XXXMSX~~ JEWS AND FOLLY TO GENTILES.

THE JEWISH NATION WAS DOMINATED BY THE IMPERIAL FORCES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. THEIR PAST WAS UTTERLY FILLED WITH WARS, INVASIONS, CAPTIVITIES AND OCCUPATION BY A FOREIGN POWER. THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS WAS A STORY OF CONSTANT STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVIAL. WHILE PAUL WAS WRITING THIS LETTER THEIR LAND WAS DIVIDED BY ROME, THE GOVERNMENT WAS RUN BY ROMANS, ROMAN LEGIONS WERE STATIONED ALL OVER THE COUNTRY SIDE AND JEWS, THE RESIDENTS OF LAND GIVEN THEM BY GOD WERE FORCED TO WORK FOR THESE OUTSIDERS. AS YOU CAN IMAGINE NO JEW FELT SYMPATHY WITH THE CAUSE OF ROME. AS IS THE CASE WITH MOST NATIONS WHEN THEY ARE BEING OPPRESSED, WHEN THEIR VERY IDENTIFY SEEMS TO BE ON THE VERGE OF BEING ~~BLOTTED OUT~~ obliterated A STRONG INNER TIDE OF LOYALTY BOUND THE JEWS TOGETHER. BENEATH THE YOKE OF THE ROMAN OPPRESSERS THE JEWS PRESERVED THE LEGENDS AND STORIES OF THEIR PAST, Solomon David THEY PRESERVED THE ANCIENT RITUAL AND WORSHIP ESTABLISHED BY ABRAHAM, ISSAC AND JOSEPH. THEY NURTURED THE SPIRIT OF A NATIONALISM THAT WAS LITERALLY WAITING FOR THE MOMENT IT COULD BREAK FORTH INTO FLAME. ON TOP OF ALL THIS EVERY JEW CARRIED DEEP IN HIS HEART THE PROMISE OF GOD THAT HE WOULD SEND A SAVIOR, THEY READ THE WORDS OF THE PROPHETS WHO PREDICTED THE

ULTIMATE VICTORY AND EXALTATION OF THE LORD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE. SURELY THE TIME WAS RIPE, THERE WAS NEVER A BETTER TIME FOR THE MESSIAH TO COME. IN MANY A JEWISH HOME AND IN THE TEMPLE PRAYERS WERE OFFERED FOR THE COMING MESSIAH, THE ONE WHO WOULD GATHER THE NATION AROUND HIM, THROW OFF THE DREADED YOKE OF ROME AND ESTABLISH ISRAEL ONCE MORE AS GOD'S PEOPLE ON EARTH. A THOUSAND SOULS VOICED THIS PRAYER, AND MANY MORE THOUSAND SWORDS WERE READY FOR ITS MATERIALIZATION.

A PEOPLE SO FILLED WITH THESE LOFTY HOPES AND DREAMS SIMPLY COULD NOT BE CONVINCED BY A MAN WHOSE SYMBOL WAS A CROSS NOT A SPEAR, BY A MAN WHO URGED COMPASSION AND LOVE INSTEAD OF REVOLT. THAT THE MESSIAH, THE CHOSEN ONE OF THE LORD SHOULD BE SHAMEFULLY PUT TO DEATH ON A CROSS WAS SIMPLY UNTHINKABLE TO THE JEWS. CHRIST CRUCIFIED WAS A STUMBLING BLOCK TO THE JEWS.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED WAS FOLLY TO THE GENTILES ALSO--BY GENTILES PAUL MEANS THOSE WHOSE PHILOSOPHY WAS HELLENIC OR GREEK. GREECE HAD FOR A LONG TIME BEEN THE INTELLECTUAL CENTER OF THE WORLD, THEIR CIVILIZATION WAS AN ACHIEVEMENT THAT IS STILL VIEWED WITH AWE. THEIR ARCHITECTURE, AND ART ADORN OUR MUSEUMS AND

THEIR LITERATURE IS STUDIED IN EVERY UNIVERSITY. GREECE GAVE BIRTH TO THE WORLD'S FIRST TRUE PHILOSOPHERS PLATO AND ARISTOTLE--SO GREAT WAS THE SCOPE OF THESE MEN'S MINDS THAT MANY HAVE SEEN IN THEM THE FIRST REAL APPROACH TO AN AWARENESS OF ONE GOD. BUT THESE MEN AND THEIR CIVILIZATION THOUGHT THAT THE HIGHEST GOOD MEN COULD ACHIEVE WAS WISDOM. A MAN'S RATIONAL FACULTIES, (HIS MIND) WAS HIS SOUL AND ANY, IDEA THAT WAS PRESENTED MUST PASS THE INFALLIBLE SCRUTINY OF THE HUMAN INTELLECT. TO THIS PHILOSOHY A MAN EVEN RISING FROM THE DEAD WAS MERE MYTHOLOGY. IF THEY WERE TO ENTERTAIN THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD, OR ULTIMATE R LITY, IT CERTAINLY WOULDN'T BE IN TERMS OF A JEWISH PEASANT WHO DIED ON A ROMAN CROSS. PAUL HIMSELF HAD GONE TO ATHENS TO PREACH HIS GOSPEL BUT FAILED EVEN TO AROUSE A LITTLE INTEREST HE JUST DIDN'T MAKE SENSE. CHRIST CRUCIFIED WAS INDEED FOLLY TO THE GENTILES.

PAUL COULD HAVE MADE HIS TASK EASIER IF HE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SUCH A STUBBORN S SOUL AND SUCH A CHRISTIAN. HIS MESSAGE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SO OBNOXIOUS IF HE WOULD HAVE DEEMPHASIZED THE CRUCIFIXION AND POINTED TO THE WAYS IN WHICH CHRIST FILLED THE PROPHETIC PRESCRIPTION. HIS GOSPEL WOULD NOT HAVE BROUGHT SO MANY SNEERS FROM THE GREEKS IF HE WOULD HAVE POINTED OUT THAT JESUS WAS TALKING ABOUT AN ULTIMATE GOOD ALSO. BUT PAUL COULDN'T DO THAT BECAUSE CHRIST

CRUCIFIED WAS HIS GOSPEL. BIBLICAL SCHOLARS AND THEOLOGIANS CALL THIS CHRISTOCENTRICISM--CHRIST AT THE CENTER. THE GOOD NEWS HE SPREAD WAS NOT OF A NICE MAN WHO DID GOOD DEEDS IN PALESTINE--IT WAS THE NEWS THAT JESUS THE CHRIST WAS CRUCIFIED. THAT HE DID SO AS A SACRIFICE, THAT IN SO DOING HE PAYED THE PRICE FOR MAN'S SIN. IN JESUS CHRIST PAUL SAW THAT GOD HAD APPROACHED MEN IN THE MOST OBVIOUS WAY POSSIBLE--IN A FELLOWMAN, HE REALIZED THAT THIS MAN WAS THE INCARNATION OF GOD, THE WORD MADE FLESH--AND THAT BECAUSE HE DIED MAN IS REDEEMED. IN THIS MAN HE SAW A BRIDGE--BETWEEN GOD AND MAN. HE SAW THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ORDER, A NEW LIFE IF ONLY HIS LISTENERS WOULD REALIZE THE GLORY OF THE MOMENTOUS EVENT. the importance

BECAUSE PAUL SO VIGOROUSLY BELIEVED THIS/IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT THE GOSPEL HE PREACHED SHOULD CLASH WITH THE PHILOSOPHIES OF THE JEW AND THE GREEK. BUT IT IS ALSO BECAUSE OF HIS UNCOMPROMISING SPIRIT THAT HE INFUSED THIS MESSAGE IN THE HEARTS OF HIS LISTENERS: THAT CHRISTIANITY GREW FROM A TINY SPARK AND A BAND OF MEN TO A FLAME THAT SWEPT ALL OVER THE THEN KNOWN WORLD.

TODAY, TO TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICANS, TO US, CHRIST CRUCIFIED IS NOT A STUMBLING BLOCK OR FOLLY**AND WHY? BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN INDIVIDUALLY

CONVINCED THAT OF ALL THE THINGS I HAVE JUST TOLD YOU ABOUT PAUL? I'M AFRAID NOT. NO, I'M AFRAID THAT A GOOD BIT OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY AND A GOOD BIT OF OUR EFFORTS HERE HAVE BEEN HISTORICALLY AND CULTURALLY CONDITIONED. WHO WOULD DENY THAT ONE OF THE REASONS, IF NOT THE MAIN REASON FOR HIS BEING A CHRISTIAN WAS BECAUSE HIS PARENTS WERE. SINCE WE WERE CHILDREN CHRISTIANITY HAS BEEN PART OF OUR LIVES WITHOUT TOO MUCH QUESTION, MANY OF US HAVE MERELY BEEN BORN INTO OUR ROLES AS CHRISTIANS.

ON THE OTHER HAND WERE WE SO INCLINED TO REJECT CHRISTIANITY, WERE WE TO FIND CHRIST CRUCIFIED A REAL STUMBLING BLOCK IT WOULD BE QUITE UNFASHIONABLE TO ADMIT IT. THE PUBLIC SCORN THAT RESULTS WHEN A PERSON SHUNS CHRISTIANITY IS A FACT--A FACT THAT ONLY A FEW COURAGEOUS WOULD CAN ENDURE.

YOU ALL KNOW THE CLICHE "FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT." APPLIED TO CHRISTIANITY WE COULD SAY "FAMILIARITY BREEDS APATHY"--WE ARE FORBIDDEN BY SOCIETY FROM SHARING CONTEMPT FOR CHRIST BUT UNCONCERN IS THE TONE OF MUCH OF OUR PROFESSED BELIEFS. A MAN WHO FALLS IN LOVE WITH AN ATTRATIVE WOMAN IS PROFOUNDLY IMPRESSED WITH HER BEAUTY EVERY TIME HE SEES HER. BUT AS TIME ROLLS ON HER BEAUTY LOSES SOME OF ITS ORIGINAL POWER EVEN THOUG HER APPEARANCE HAS NOT CHANGED. THE SAME THING HAS HAPPENED IN MANKIND'S ENCOUNTER WITH CHRISTIANITY.

THE ORIGINAL URGENCY IS DULLED, THE EXCITEMENT WITH WHICH PAUL PREACHED THE GOOD NEWS IS A RARE THING INDEED.

SOME TIME PICK UP THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TRY TO IMAGINE READING ONE OF THE GOSPELS FOR THE FIRST TIME. TRY TO ELIMINATE ALL OPINIONS AND BELIEFS, ALL THE THINGS YOU HAVE HEARD AND LEARNED AND READ IT AS IF YOU HAD NEVER HEARD OF JESUS CHRIST. PERHAPS IN THAT WAY WE CAN FEEL THE FULL FORCE OF HIS GOSPEL, MAYBE THEN WE WILL APPRECIATE THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT HE IS SAYING.

IF THE CLAIMS MADE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ARE TRUE, IF THE GOSPEL IS VALID THEN PAUL'S PREACHING IS OF OUTMOST IMPORTANCE THEN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ENDEAVOR IN THE WORLS TODAY--IT IS, ~~THE MOST IMPORANT~~ XXXXXXXXX OR SHOULD BE, OF GREATEST IMPORTANCE TO YOU AND ME.

THAT GOD, THE CREATOR, HAS APPROACHED MAN IN JESUS CHRIST IS NOT A STATEMENT WE CAN TAKE LIGHTLY. IF WE TRULY BELIEVE IT WE MUST, LIKE PAUL, PUT IT AT THE VERY CENTER OF OUR LIVES AND THINKING. CHRISTIANITY CANNOT BE SHELVED IN A SEPARATE CATEGORY WITH OUR OTHER ACTIVITIES AND INTERESTS--IT MUST BE AT THE CENTER OF ALL WE DO, IT MUST BE THE DETERMINING FACTOR FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN. WE TOO MUCH BE "CHRISTOCENTRIC."

IF PAUL WERE WRITING HIS LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS TODAY HE MIGHT SAY

CHRIST CRUCIFIED IS A STUMBLING BLOCK TO JEWS, FOLLY TO GREEKS AND UNIMPORTANT TO AMERICANS. ONE NEEDS ONLY TO LOOK AT A NEWSPAPER, LISTEN TO A NEWSCAST, OR MERELY LOOK AROUND HIM TO REALIZE THAT AS A NATION AND INDIVIDUALLY WE SIMPLY DON'T SHOW ANY EVIDENCE THAT THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST MEANS ANYTHING VERY IMPORTANT. THERE HAVE BEEN MOVIES ON TELEVISION RECENTLY OF THE SEGREGATIONIST DEMONSTRATIONS IN NEW ORLEANS- CAN THE ABSOLUTE HATRED ON THE FACES OF THE HOUSE* WIVES BE EVIDENCE THAT PERHAPS THEY ARE NOT LIVING IN CHRIST AND CHRIST IN THEM?

WE HAVE RECENTLY WITNESSED A FLOOD OF RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE IN THE NAME OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY. A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE ELECTION I RECEIVED A PACKET OF LITERATURE IN THE MAIL CONCERNING A PROTESTANTS RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ELECTION. THIS JUNK, AND I'M AFRAID THAT IS THE NICEST THING I CAN CALL IT, WAS BRIMMING WITH IGNORANCE, HATE AND SELF RIGHTEOUS PRIDE, WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE THAT THE PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR WRITING AND DISTRIBUTING IT, AND THE PEOPLE INFLUENCED BY IT WERE NOT TRULY "CHRISTOCENTRIC." COULD IT BE THAT THERE ARE OTHER DRIVING FORCES AT THE CENTER OF THEIR LIVES THAN THE CHRIST. I DON'T WANT TO BELABOR THE SUBJECT OF THE EVILS OF SOCIETY--BUT WE MUST REALIZE THAT AN AMERICAN CULTURE THAT CALLS ITSELF CHRISTIAN SIMPLY DOESN'T FIT IN THE CHRISTIANITY OF THE MAN WHO WROTE TO THE CORINTHIANS.

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THE DRIVING FORCE IN PAUL, HIS PRIMARY MOTIVATION IS SUMMED UP IN HIS STATEMENT "FOR IT IS NOT I THAT LIVE, BUT CHRIST THAT LIVES INME." THIS IS CHRISTIANITY, FOR PAUL PUTTING JESUS CHRIST AT THE VERY CENTER OF OUR LIVES SO THAT WE CAN SAY IT IS NO LONGER MY SELFISH NEEDS THAT MOTIVATE ME--BUT JESUS CHRIST.

CHRISTIANITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN RATHER VAUGE ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF JESUS IN OUR HEARTS I HAVE SEEN AN EVANGELIST WITH A FLANNEL BOARD EXPLAINING THIS WITH A HEART WITH A DOOR ON IT. A GOOD CHRISTIAN WILL SOMEHOW OPEN THIS DOOR AND LET JESUS IN. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WHEN PAUL SAID "CHRIST IN ME" HE WAS BEING A LITTLE MORE PROFOUND THAN THIS.

THAT GOD'S INCARNATION HAD DIED AS A SACRIFICE FOR MAN'S SIN WAS SO VITAL THAT PAUL WAS WILLING TO SAY THAT REALIZATION OF THIS WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN HIS LIFE, MORE THAN THAT IT WAS WHAT MADE HIM TICK--TO SUCH A DEGREE THAT HE COULD SAY "IT IS NO LONGER I THAT LIVE--BUT CHRIST IN ME."

IF WE ARE TO CALL OURSELVES CHRISTIAN WE MUST BE ABLE TOSAY THE SAME THING. AS HARD AS IT MAY SEEM WE MUST TRY TO PUSH ALL OTHER FRAMES OF REFERENCE SUCH AS: HOW TO KEEP UP WITH THE JONESE, OR EVEN HOW TO APPEAR TO BE A BETTER PERSON: TO THE SIDE AND START WITH THE BASIC FACT OF A CHRIST THAT WAS CRUCIFIED. ANY OTHER COURSE OF ACTION SIMPLY VERIFIES THE TITLE OF MY SERMON--CHRIST CRUCIFIED IS A STUMBLING

BLOCK TO JEWS, FOLLY TO GENTILES AND UNIMPORTANT TO AMERICANS.

READ THE NEW TESTAMENT AS IF IT WERE JUST WRITTEN, FORGET THAT YOU'VE BEEN A CHRISTIAN ALL YOUR LIFE AND TRY TO SEE THAT THE NEWS PAUL AND ALL THE OTHER NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS WERE PROCLAIMING IS THE MOST IMPORTANT NEWS THE WORLD HAS EVER HEARD. SEE THAT IN THIS MAN GOD HAS DONE SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY OTHER EVENT IN HISTORY.

BEFORE WE SING JOY TO THE WORLD THE LORD HAS COME, WE MUST BE ABLE TO SING BENEATH THE CROSS OF JESUS--I FAIN WOULD TAKE MY STAND.

BEFORE WE ARE ABLE TO TRULY CELEBRATE HIS BIRTH AS THE COMING OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR WE MUST DISCOVER WHETHER HE ACTUALLY IS OUR LORD AND SAVIOR.

IF WE REALLY MEAN WHAT WE SAY WHEN WE SING JOY TO THE WORLD--THEN WE MUST BE ABLE TO SAY THAT SURELY THIS IS A TIME FOR CELEBRATION BECAUSE IT IS THE BIRTH OF HIM WHOM IS AT THE CENTER OF OUR LIVES: we must be ABLE TO SAY WITH PAUL--THAT "IT IS NO LONGER I THAT LIVES--BUT CHRIST THAT LIVES IN ME."

AMEN.